



## Wigan Educational Psychology Service

### Supporting those who have experienced loss or bereavement

Individuals experience loss and bereavement in many different circumstances. Our experience of bereavement depends upon a complex interplay of factors. This document aims to provide an understanding of typical grief responses and strategies to support individuals.

Please remember that supporting someone bereaved will give rise to strong feelings; these are normal and natural. Finding ways to support your own well-being is essential.

#### The process of grieving

The grieving process for each individual will be different. Following bereavement, individuals may experience a range of emotions. Although people sometimes refer to a cycle of grief, it is important to note that these emotions do not necessarily occur in a linear process.



## Impact on emotions

Individuals may be fearful of:-

- their own mortality
- separation from those remaining
- being deserted and unprotected
- sharing feelings with others
- upsetting other people by a display of their own grief
- further loss

Individuals may feel guilty because:-

- they believe the death to be their fault or a punishment
- the chance to make amends has been removed
- they feel that they did not love the person enough

Individuals may feel angry:-

- with the person for dying and abandoning them
- with themselves for not doing something to prevent the death
- for the injustice of life

Individuals may be confused:-

- about their perceptions and memories of the person
- about the explanations which are given to them
- by the responses of those closest to them who are suffering from their own grief
- by being torn between grieving and giving - they may feel they have to look after others at a time when they desperately need to be looked after themselves

## Core approaches

- Find a way to acknowledge the individual's loss
- Find time to listen both to what they say, and how they present
- Allow for silences
- Acknowledge and validate strong feelings

## Bereavement and loss in children and young people

### The development of understanding of bereavement and loss

- 0-2 years – Babies and very young children will not understand the permanence of loss. They are likely to react to upset and changes in their environment brought about by the disappearance of a significant person who responded to their needs on a daily basis
- 3-5 years – This development stage may be characterised by magical thinking and children may associate death with sleep. Children at this stage often struggle with abstract concepts like ‘forever’ and find it difficult to grasp that death is permanent. Their limited understanding may lead to an apparent lack of reaction when told about a death.
- 5-7 years – Children at this stage begin to develop an understanding that death is permanent and final. They may be fascinated with the physical aspects of death or the rituals surrounding it.
- 8-11 years - As they get older, young people begin to have a more mature understanding of death, realising that it is final, permanent, universal and an unavoidable part of life.
- Adolescence – At this stage young people can usually think in abstract terms and may ask more detailed questions about the death. Grief may be compounded by the struggles of adolescence, finding it hard to ask for support while trying to show the world they are independent. Young people often have their own beliefs and strongly held views, and may challenge the beliefs and explanations offered by others.

### Possible responses to bereavement and loss in children and young people

Children and young people experiencing bereavement will react in different ways depending upon their developmental stage and a range of other factors. Some children may react immediately, while a grief reaction in others may be triggered some time later. Changes may be evidenced in a child or young person’s emotional, social and behavioural responses in school and other settings.

Examples of changes might include:

- reluctance to go to school or attend lessons
- reluctance to go out to play/mix with peers

- problems with focussing on or completing tasks
- fear of being alone
- becoming upset by seemingly minor events
- changing patterns of social relationships e.g. becoming withdrawn, nervous or starting to bully others
- aggression, anger and non-compliance
- lower self-esteem and self-confidence
- sullenness/irritability/clinginess/dependency/separation anxiety
- regression to younger patterns of behaviour
- sleep disturbance/nightmares
- eating problems/change in eating patterns
- complaining of headaches/stomach aches/pains
- becoming more prone to illness or infection
- risk-taking behaviours
- self-harm

### **Approaches for children and young people**

Educational staff can play a vital part in helping children to work through the grieving process.

The following key recommendations for supporting children and young people are designed to supplement the core approaches detailed above:-

- Prioritise close liaison between home and your setting - it will help the child feel more secure, and provide extra information on how the child is coping.
- Provide routine and structure
- Acknowledge their loss and provide age appropriate, factually accurate explanations to minimise fear and confusion (avoid euphemisms such as 'gone to sleep' 'passed away' 'gone to the angels')
- Provide space and time for reflection
- Find time to listen, taking your cue from the child
- Provide a range of ways for the child to express their feelings
- Reassure them that they are not to blame
- Acknowledge and validate strong feelings the child may have. Try to avoid comments such as "I'm sure you don't mean that" or "You'll soon feel better". It is important that the child's strong feelings are believed, acknowledged and discussed
- Explanations may need to be repeated as children and young people can take time to assimilate difficult information. It is fine to say, "I don't know" if you cannot answer a question.

- Take time to clarify if you think you do not understand a point being made
- In consultation with the family, it may be appropriate to support the child in developing a keepsake in memory of their loved one e.g. a memory box, memory jar with coloured sand, or a collage.
- There are a range of books and stories available which can be used therapeutically to support the child and help them to feel understood
- Note important dates - in providing ongoing support it is important to be sensitive to special days such as birthdays or the anniversary of the bereavement.